

'Day of Infamy'

Oklahoma battleship gunner's mate recounts experience of Pearl Harbor attack

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Louis Meyer is among few individuals who actually witnessed the beginning and end of America's participation in World War II.

A third class gunner's mate on the battleship Oklahoma for four years, Meyer survived the Pearl Harbor attack 60 years ago today. Less than four years later, he witnessed the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay. He was serving on the heavy cruiser USS Taylor moored right next to the battleship Missouri, where surrender papers were signed.

Meyer, 84, of Hot Springs, recalls the "Day of Infamy" like it was yesterday. Every day he raises and lowers an American flag in his front yard as a tribute to his fallen shipmates and to every American who has served in the military.

"That morning a shipmate and I were walking through a passageway. The smoking lamp was out and everything was quiet as things were being prepared for Sunday services," Meyer recalled. "We were next to the ship's store when the first torpedo hit us. My shipmate yelled, 'It must be the Japs,' and then the loud speaker blared out, 'General quarters! No s***! This is the real thing!' That's exactly what he said right over the P.A. system."

Meyer's battlestation was at the top of turret No. 3. On his way there, the second torpedo struck Oklahoma's port side, and Meyer said, "That hit was close to the meat locker, and there were frozen meats all over the place right before we got to the handling room at the bottom of our turret. Then we had to climb up platforms to get to our battle station.

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station, all the lights went out. Three 1,500-pound projectiles started rolling as the ship began listing, and we knew we had to get out of there. We went into the next compartment, and we found the chief, who was stunned. He asked us where we were going, and I said, 'We're getting out of here!'

By the time Meyer, the chief and the powderman made it topside, the Oklahoma's port deck was already awash, having taken five torpedo hits on that side.

Meyer pointed out that the inspection plates on the Oklahoma's armor belt had been removed in preparation for a trip back to the states for refitting and modernization. The absence of these plates caused the Oklahoma to capsize more rapidly, resulting in the loss of 429 of the ship's 900 men.

"That is not generally known," he said.

He continued, "About the time I got in the water, the Arizona got hit. The concussion was tremendous. I swam away for a bit, turned around and saw some men on the barbette of the No. 3 gun turret, waiting to go into the water. About then, she capsized, and the undertow pulled me under."

Meyer said a feeling of peace came over him as he went into a mild state of shock. He then bumped into a shipmate under water which brought him to his senses and sent him clawing to the surface. He has no idea how long he was under water.

"We couldn't make it over to Ford Island because of all the burning oil and debris, so my shipmate and I swam out into the channel a ways. We saw a float plane that had slid off the ship, and we grabbed onto it," Meyer said. "The Japs started strafing, but we didn't get hit and eventually we got picked up by a motor launch."

After getting cleaned up and changing clothes on Ford Island, Meyer was taken to Plantation Hospital where he was treated overnight for a sick stomach from swallowing seawater and fuel oil. He said it took about two weeks to get all the oil washed out of his body.

Meyer turned back the clock one day to Dec. 6 and recalled an excursion with a man named Caney, a machinist mate in the Oklahoma's engine room.

"The day before the raid, we went into Honolulu, and he loaned me \$20 so I could buy this ring I liked at the Marine barracks. When we got back to the ship, we parted ways, and he said he was going to sleep in the next morning." Meyer paused a moment and said, "That's the last time I saw him. He didn't make it out."

LOUIS MEYER

Caney's uncle lived in Dubuque, Iowa, also Meyer's home town. After the war, Meyer tried to pay the \$20 to the uncle, "but he told me to forget it."

Another Dubuque resident on the Oklahoma was the chaplain named Smith.

"His battle station was in sick bay, and when the ship started capsizing, he let several other men escape through this port hole before me, but he didn't make it out," Meyer said.

After spending two days at the submarine base, "they called out my name and put me on the destroyer Hull. Here I was a battleship man and I had never been on destroyer in my life."

Meyer cheated death once again. He was eventually recalled to gunnery school in Washington, D.C., and not long after that, the Hull capsized and sank in a typhoon with no survivors.

After school, Meyer was transferred to the Taylor which saw numerous campaigns in the Pacific. The ship took part in several island bombardments and was credited with sinking one submarine, one cruiser, two destroyers and shooting down an enemy plane. Meyer said the most memorable engagement on board the Taylor was in Kula Gulf in 1943.

At the end of the war, Meyer found himself in Tokyo Bay right next to the Missouri.

"They (Japanese officials) had to cross our ship to get to the Missouri," Meyer recalled. "We had a mutt dog named Gimmick on board that the captain had found in the Philippines. He ran out there, bit one of the Japanese representatives on the ankle, and a photographer captured it on film! It later appeared in 'Liberty' magazine with the caption, 'Last bite of the war'."

Meyer later finished an 11-year career with the Navy. He said he has never had the urge to go back to Pearl Harbor, but he did make an Oklahoma shipmates reunion about five years ago in Oklahoma City.

"There's not many of us left," he said.

When asked to compare Pearl Harbor with the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Meyer concluded, "They were just like us. They didn't stand a chance."

